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When God Was A Woman

Tammy Hillebrand

When God Was a Woman by Merlin Stone. New York and London:
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

After reading *When God Was a Woman*, many would label the sculptor, amateur historian, and author Merlin Stone a radical feminist, a woman who has made "absurd" connections between the "pagan Goddess cult" and the Jewish and Christian religions. These readers are the traditionalists in our society who are, according to Stone, imbued with patriarchal attitudes reflected in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. It is these people Stone wants to reach with her book. As stated in her introduction, she does not want to revive the Goddess tradition, but to make both women and men aware of this ancient tradition and how many of our patriarchal attitudes were created in reaction to it. The book traces the Goddess from Her glorious beginnings, through Her metamorphosis during the time of the northern invaders, and finally to Her demise at the hands of our Jewish and Christian forefathers.

Stone first shows us that the Goddess has a long history that begins in the Upper Paleolithic period (c. 40,000 B.P.). During the Neolithic (after c. 8,000 B.C.E.), She existed throughout the agriculturally-based village communities of the Near and Middle East. While Stone focuses her attention on these traditions, M. Gimbutas and others document the fact that the religion (or religions) of the Goddess was much more widespread. Despite being known by many names, the Goddess was strikingly similar in all of these cultures. She was "Mother of the Universe" which is, according to Stone, understandable in relation to cultures which had no knowledge of conception and saw the female as the sole "creator." This is admittedly a controversial issue, but Stone makes a convincing case.

The importance of the Goddess is clearly seen in the great abundance of Goddess figurines uncovered in early Neolithic archaeological sites, especially the smaller figurines which, as Gimbutas suggests, might have been part of ritual activity in the home. These small female statuettes, referred to as Venus figurines, were often discovered close to the remains of the sunken walls of what were probably the earliest human-made dwellings (p. 13).

It seems that in these cultures women had a much different role in the home than the one later patriarchal society assigned to them. Stone gives us a good description of what it was like to be a woman during the time of the Goddess. This was the most intriguing (although certainly controversial) section of the book for me – one which corroborated my thoughts on the lives of females during this time. Stone therefore

maintains that gender roles were mostly the exact opposite of what they are today. Women held special power in society in relation to property ownership and the exercise of authority. Most importantly, women were the givers of ancestry. In these matrilineal societies, the mother's name was given to the children and an emphasis was generally placed on female kinship. The role of men in these female-oriented cultures was probably summed up best by Diodorus of Sicily, whom Stone quotes as saying, "Men looked after domestic affairs, reared the children, and did as they were told by their wives" (35). While Stone believes in the existence of an ancient, matriarchal society, most experts (although most of these are male experts) feel that the evidence suggests a system where women and men lived in a kind of egalitarian society.

Stone then introduces us to men very different from the above mentioned Diodorus. These men were the so-called "northern invaders," – the Indo-European warriors who quickly and violently conquered the people of the Goddess traditions just as their male, mountain and sky father god overtook the Goddess. The overthrow of the Goddess was aided by the fact that She was always associated with a male consort. Stone shows how the Goddess' young male consort, who at one time played the role of a lover to the Goddess, was transformed into a dominant figure who eventually kills the older female deity. This battle is witnessed in many cultures and generally depicts a triumphant father god who destroys an evil female deity portrayed as a serpent or a dragon. Contrary to what is suggested by Stone, this transformation is not necessarily due to the external invasion of the Indo-European warriors. It may also result from changes due to internal factors within the Goddess traditions, as suggested by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew.

In an especially controversial section of her book, Stone connects the tradition of the northern invaders with the Luvians and the Levites, two groups associated with the ancient Hebrew religion. The Luvians were a part of the Hittite people who had been dominated by the Indo-European warriors, and Stone believes that the Luvians were possibly the ancestors of the Levites, the law-making tribe of Israel. Even though her theory is weakened by a lack of information on the Luvians, it does seem probable that the ancestry of the Levites is traceable to the northern invaders. Stone argues her point by documenting many similarities between the beliefs of the Indo-Europeans and the Levites. They both, for example, believed in mountain gods and seven-day creation stories, and Yahweh battled the serpent Leviathan, just as the Indo-European god defeated the serpent Goddess. It is true, of course, that similarities do not prove an actual historical connection, but the parallels are provocative.

It is clear, however, that the Levites' male-dominated religion did not go uncontested. This makes perfect sense when we consider that the original Israelites who were delivered into Canaan entered a land which, as Stone suggests, was dominated by the Goddess traditions. Stone easily finds many passages in the Bible which indicate the Israelites' continuing affiliation with the religion of the Canaanite Goddess Asherah. For example, she points to many incidents in the book of Judges

where the Israelites were commanded to cut down asherah poles erected as shrines to the Goddess.

After examining Stone's arguments, I am persuaded that the patriarchal attitudes which permeate our society emerged out the transformation and destruction of the Goddess traditions. The Levites (the law makers) seem to have had the biggest hand in writing the first books of the Bible, especially the P or "Priestly" sections. According to Stone, the Levites created the Torah in order to draw their confused "congregation" away from the more popular religion of the Goddess.

Stone also opened my eyes about the biblical creation stories in relation to the common threads of sexuality, the serpent, and the tree. We learn through many examples that these three themes, so prominent in the story of Adam and Eve, also played crucial roles in the Goddess traditions. It seems obvious that the writer(s) of the biblical creation stories made a great effort to condemn important aspects of the Goddess, especially the aspect of sexuality. As Stone thoroughly discusses, it is the Goddess' sexuality which is continually attacked in the Bible. In the matrilinear Goddess traditions, women's sexuality was free and the basis for ancestral authority, whereas the Levites, in order to stress the importance of paternity among the Israelites, wrote laws to suppress women and make sex the original sin. Stone argues that these very laws still shape our ideas of sexuality and are the foundation for the inferior status of women in society.

As a woman in today's society, I greatly enjoyed reading Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman*. As a student of the Old Testament and prehistoric religion, I found it easy to see many of the connections presented by Stone. I have learned to read the Bible as a symbolic document and to see that many of the early stories were created in order to establish the law of the father god. After reading the biblical creation stories, it was already clear to me that the status of women was related to the image of Eve and the mythic story of her evil doings. In this sense, Stone did an excellent job of tracing the heritage of the Goddess and Her probable presence in the biblical creation stories. My favorite part of the book was a very small thing – her capitalization of "goddess," "her," and "she," just as every noun and pronoun for the male Jewish and Christian God is capitalized.

The major problem I had with Stone's book was the lack of complete information provided for some of her arguments, especially those which she supported with biblical passages. An example of this is her linking of Abraham with the Hittites, as when she quotes Genesis 23 to the effect that the Hittites call Abraham a mighty prince among them. What she forgets to include is the previous passage which contradicts her argument – Abraham's declaration that he is a stranger and an alien among the Hittites.

All in all, I feel Stone's book was very thorough and well-written and, most importantly, her book made me consider a woman's place in society today. I now see one of the foundations for the patriarchal attitudes I have been questioning for the past few years. The book also made me question just how different my life would be if the Goddess traditions had survived. This is especially interesting to think about as a

female senior, trying to find a job in the field of mathematics, and really feeling the pressures of our patriarchal society. I can only hope that both women and men will read this book and realize that it has not always been a male-dominated world. Perhaps if we appreciate and understand some of the ideas from the ancient Goddess traditions, we will begin to judge women (especially women in areas like mathematics that are almost exclusively dominated by men) on the basis of their actual talent and ability.